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AUTHOR Ruetrakul, Pimon
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ABSTRACT

The perceptions of Southeast Asian graduate students at the University of Pittsburgh were explored. The students were asked to elucidate the problems which arose as they and their families adapted to the American experience. Findings are reported in seven categories. They are the following: (1) academic expenses did not cause financial problems but the students had financial difficulties with the cost of living and recreational activities; (2) comments about housing were negative, especially on amount of space, costs, and heat; (3) all of the students rated their facility with English as adequate, but a few of the spouses expressed inadequacies in this area; (4) most of the students approved of their children's learning English, but thought American culture to be at odds with their own and didn't want their children to adopt aspects of it; (5) impressions of American schools were positive; (6) the students and their families were in good health; and (7) most of the students are successful academically, as are their children. The research confirms previous findings about international students and their families. (VM)

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A STUDY OF PROBLEMS AND STRESS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDENTS WITH ACCOMPANYING FAMILIES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

By

Pimon Ruetrakul

School of Education

University of Pittsburgh

Paper presented at the panel on "Cultural Diversity in North American Schools", 31st annual meeting of the Comparative and International Education Society, Washington, D.C. March 12-15, 1987

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Within the past few years the number of graduate international students has increased on a worldwide basis despite the fact that the total number of all students (including undergraduate) studying outside their home countries has decreased. With more than 340,000 foreign students studying in the United States (Lulat, Altbach & Kelly, 1986), the graduate education of international students is increasingly becoming an important focus of attention for many U.S. universities. Many of these graduate students bring their families with them to the States and because family relationships are often important factors in the students' academic success, it is important to study the family's adaptation to the U.S. culture.

Maintaining several roles in the intercultural environment requires a great deal of responsibility and energy, both of which can increase stress on the students. Depending upon the character of the individual and other related factors, international students in the U.S. may find that they have one or more of the following problems: a) institutional, related to the academic setting; b) academic, involving the students' competency in the major fields and their English language proficiency; c) emotional, including adjustment, stress, coping and social behavior of the student; and d) attitudinal, involving likes and dislikes of the host country, the surroundings, etc. (Lever, 1982; Hull, 1978; Spaulding & Flack, 1976; Becker, 1968). These international students come from a variety of cultures. It is reasonable to believe that the more different their culture is from the culture of the U.S., the more difficult their adjustment to life in the U.S. will be.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Southeast Asian graduate students concerning their sojourn in the U.S. and especially concerning the problems and stress experienced by their children. Although numerous studies have been done on the adaptation of international students to host cutures, none has been identified after an extensive literature search, which deal with the children of international students. This study addressed the following questions:

1) What are the perceptions of Southeast Asian parents/students about problems that arise when they and their children adapt to the new environment, especially with matters pertaining to: a)financial factors, b) housing, c) language difficulty, d) cultural conflicts related to child-rearing practices, religion, diet and schools for their children. e) academic factors and f) health.

2) What are the major concerns of parents for their chidren during their stay in the U.S.?

METHODS

Subjects

The subjects of this study were students from Southeast Asian countries studying at the University of Pittsburgh who have their families living with them on campus. For the purpose of this research, international student-parents are defined as these students who possess legal residency and citizenship of one of the selected nations. They are not citizens of the United States and are not in the process of applying for United States permanent residency or citizenship at the time of this study. They must be students at the University of Pittsburgh at the time of the study and they intend to return to their home country upon completion of their study.

There were 13 graduate students along with their spouses and 18 children who were interviewed in this study. Of those 13 families, 5 families were Indonesian and 8 families were Malaysian. The average number of children per family is 3.2 but only those children who are between the ages of 6 and 11 were included in the survey. Both parents of each child were asked to participate in the interviews because they all have valuable information to contribute to the study.

Instrument

The data required for this study were the responses of the student-parents and their spouses to both the structured and non-structured interview questions developed by the researcher.

The content of the interview questionnaires was categorized into 2 major groups: questions that related to the parents' perception of the problem of themselves and the problems of the child. The interview questions are organized into 6 areas of interest which correspond to the research questions of the study

Content analysis method was used in analyzing data from the open-ended questions in the interview questionnaire. The interview responses were classified according to the frequency and categories of responses, thus the number of responses of each question were not equal to the number of subjects. The analysis focused on both individual and group responses to determine the patterns. These data were of prime importance in determining those factors which affected their problems and stress.

RESULTS

A. Financial factors. All of the thirteen students in the study, both from Malaysia and Indonesia, reported little or no financial problem because all were being sponsored students by their governments or various organizations. They experienced no problem regarding money available for academic expenses but some reported difficulties with the amount of money available for their basic living expenses and recreational activities. One student expressed concern that his children did not receive the proper diet, clothing, toys and living condition because of limited funds for those purpose.

B. Housing. In response to the open-ended question of how to describe their housing, all 13 students and 13 spouses had something negative to say about their present housing. There were no favorable responses concerning overall housing. The small size of the apartments was a major problem with 10 persons (38.5%) commenting unfavorably. Most families chose to stay in one bedroom apartments because of the high rental costs, even though some of the families had as many as five children. They usually converted the living rooms into a second bedroom.

Adequate heat was another frequent complaint of all of the students (26%). The reason were due partly to the fact that these students were used to the warm tropical climates of their home country and partly because the houses were poorly insulated and the landlords controlled the central heating to keep down the utilities cost . Rental costs, water, pests, and the quality of lighting and ventilation also drew negative comments. Regarding the management of the housing, three students reported negatively and one positively about the landlord services. Three students complained about the contract policies of the housing management and especially policies of buildings owned by the university.

All Malaysian sponsored students in the Masters degree programs are given a maximum time of 18 months to finish their studies. They must return to their home country at the end of 18 months whether or not they complete their studies . Because most housing contracts are renewed on an annual basis (no exception), this causes a great deal of anxiety and inconvenience to the students. Housing locations were also mentioned negatively and noise from the streets were a problem (the University of Pittsburgh is an urban campus and this is unavoidable).

Three students expressed concern over lack of recreational facilities for their children in the neighborhood within a walking distance of their home (most children use the parking lot spaces between their apartments or the university grounds as their playground). Some expressed dissatisfaction about their neighbors, the safety of the neighborhood and the environment. The only positive response about housing came from three students who commented on the convenience of the short distance of the housing sites from the university campus. They were able to come home for lunch and between classes and visit the library at their convenient hours.

C. Language Difficulty. Almost exclusively, the thirteen Malaysian and Indonesian students felt that their English fluency was adequate. They were asked to rate their ability in using or understanding English in their studies on a five-point scale - fluent, almost fluent, adequate, poor and inadequate. All students rated their English ability in reading,

comprehension, writing, conversation, and class discussions as fluent and almost fluent and or adequate. None rated himself as poor or inadequate. Only a few spouses expressed inadequacy in their ability in conversing with American people.

D. Cultural Conflicts

1. Child-rearing practices. The parents were asked if they were comfortable with what their children were learning from the American media. Fifteen parents responded negatively to their children's exposure to the media especially to television. Eleven parents felt comfortable with the media because they excercised supervision over viewing time, the selection of channels and programs. Sixteen parents reported of the need for supervision of television viewing. Most parents commented positively about the influence of books. Those who rated the media positively stated that from watching telelvision their children learned English, the American way of life and that some programs had educational values. The negative responses were categorized as follow: nine parents stated that television showed a culture, and a way of life different than their own; seven reported that too much sex was shown on the screen; seven commented that T.V. had a bad influence on their children; five were concerned about television violence; three parents mentioned the bad language used on the T.V. shows. Some of the parents expressed concern over the lack of respect toward their parents and elders and too much religious matter shown on television, especially during Christmas time. These are some of the quotes from parents: "T.V. programs here are not conducive to Asian culture", "We don't want our children to learn American culture, it is immoral", "too much bad language", " advertisements are too sexually explicit", "children's behavior is too wild".

The question of whether they feel comfortable with what their children learn from American peers yielded 16 yes and 10 no's. The positive responses comments had to do with their children learning English, social skills, and American culture. One Indonesian student commented that American people are very polite, disciplined, punctual and democratic and he

liked his child to learn that. The negative concern over American peers centered on bad language; culture and manners, sexual behavior, dress style and aggressiveness. "American children are argumentative, they talk back, [are] too outspoken, show no respect towards elders, [and] these are not acceptable. We prefer not to mix with them much".

The amount of contacts that these children have with their American peers are limited, and that these contacts only occurred at school. Fifteen parents expressed their preference for their children to have more American friends, four reported that their children do have good relationships with American friends, five are strongly opposed to any interaction with American children, and two remained neutral. Out of 15 parents who preferred to have more contact with American children, twelve stated that they only want their children to practice English. " It's O.K. it's better than T.V."; "the stay is so short, there's no time to mingle"; "we prefer not to mix with certain groups of kids, they are nasty, fight, hit and too rough".

From responses to those questions about their concern over their child's welfare in the U.S., seventeen parents reported that they worried more than before, eight have less concerns, and, one parent remained the same. Among the concerns that these students mentioned most frequently were: bad language influence (7), bad behavior and manners (6), concerns about the adjustment to the Malaysian school system upon their return (6), media influence (4), fear of kidnapping(4), living conditions(4), religious study (3), loss of the Malay language (3), drugs (3), and corruption of the Moslem eating habits (3).

Sixteen parents labeled English language as the most positive and valuable experience their child had in the U.S. Eleven parents rated American education as a positive experience, they spoke highly of American school system and their teachers and that it was a significant factor in helping their children adapt to life in the U.S. The other factors that played major roles in their positive experiences are cultural experiences (6), social skills (5), better learning skills as in reading(5), teachers (5), independence (4), travelling and sightseeing (4),more outspokenness(3), and good relationships with American children (3), etc.

Very few of the parents reported that their children had had any negative experience during their stay in the U.S.. The most frequent remark (from five parents) was that their children were still too young, and they did not think that their children had been exposed to many negative experiences. However, the few negative experiences that were reported fall into the same problem categories as reported in the previous questions such as: mannerisms, lack of respect toward the elderly, the loss of their native language, the influence of television, sex, etc.

In what way did your experience in the U.S. influence your children? This question yielded thirteen responses as that they are more open-minded liberal, more tolerant, more understanding of their "plight", and more diplomatic with their behavior. Seven parents viewed themselves as having become more strict, and five students said they became role models for their children's study habits. Ten parents reported that their children became more inquisitive, more knowledgeable, more communicative, more mature and more independent. Others reported becoming closer to their children and family, more morally oriented because of absence of Muslim religious studies.

How does your relationship with your children differ from the way it was in your country? This question yielded fourteen responses of: more communication, more open upbringing, more freedom within the family; ten responses of spending more time with their families, seven said they were more protective, six mentioned of the less luxurious life style and more the responsibilities. The others responses were that the children were more confined because of weather, fear of kidnapping, and lack of personal transportation (only three of the families have cars); the children were too small to understand the difference, their eating habits changed, and that they preferred Malaysian culture.

2. Schooling. The parental perceptions of their children toward school are impressive. On a five-point scale of very good, good, average, not so good and poor, all parents described their children as either very good or a good student(s). The attitude toward school was also very

good or good, although some experienced difficulties during the first few months after their arrival. All parents also reported positively about their child's completion of school assignments.

3. Diet. Nine persons experienced some eating problems since their arrival. Seventeen parents reported no problems. Those who reported little or no problem gave credits to their spouses' cooking and the accessibility to oriental food and spices in Pittsburgh. However, one couple reported difficulty in eating because of different flavor meat, oil, and spices. Three of those who had problems indicated the major problem was during the first three months when their family had not yet arrived. Some problems were due to religious reasons. The orthodox Islam were not permitted to consume meat that is not "haral" (meats that are not slaughtered according to Islamic procedures and by Muslim). They had to depend on only one Arab meat market which means that the prices and supplies of meat were not always good. The limited meat consumption problem also affected children at school. They were not able to eat any meat at all at the school lunch. They either had to box their lunch or ate only fish or vegetarian dishes. One parent expressed concern over his child's health because he was unable to get a proper diet at school. Regarding atitudes of the children toward American food, twelve parents indicated their children liked American food very much especially fast food like fish fillet and pizza. Four parents mentioned that their children preferred American food, only four liked it sometimes, and six reported that they did not like it.

4. Religion. The content of their responses indicated that religious factors did not hinder good relationship with U.S. nationals (seventeen indicated no problem, five reported yes concerning food and drink and because some American associated them with the Arabs and terrorists; two related no association with any American because of different habits and culture). Twenty parents also indicated that religious practices and beliefs help them adapt to this country through praying, reading the Koran and weekly religious group discussions.

E. Academic Factors. Only the graduate students (not their spouses) were asked to respond to this category. Ten students indicated that their experience at University of Pittsburgh

had been encouraging and worthwhile. Three students found academic life was difficult to readjust to after working outside academia. Sometimes they felt discouraged because of low grades and financial problems. Nine students reported satisfaction with course work and that they were challenging, useful, stimulating and are helpful to their present jobs. Five students indicated that they were gaining a lot of experience during their study, and they felt that the university is a good higher education institution. The majority praised their advisors and professors as being helpful and understanding. However, three students were dissatisfied with faculty members whom they felt were cultural biased and/or disorganized. Four students valued their experience through meeting more people and they were able to be with family.

F. Health. Eleven students and nine spouses indicated no trouble sleeping since arrival. Two students had some problem during the first few months and because of lack of excercise. Four wives had trouble sleeping because of homesickness and cold weather. The most reports concerning their health problem were from seven students who experienced colds, and flu because of cold weather. Three had problems because of headache from work, high blood pressure and ulcers. Six students reported good health while staying in this country. Some said their health improved because of less tension from work and less pollution. Nine spouses experienced no health problems while four others reported problems such as sleeping, diabetes and miscarriage.

When they were asked whether they were more tense and anxious than usual while staying in this country, nine students reported more and four reported less. Three of them only experienced anxiety during the first few months. Five wives reported more while eight reported less. Among these, two indicated anxiety occurred only during the first fiew months. Overall reasons of experiencing more anxiety were due to studying, living condition, time pressuring, housing contract and the welfare of their wives and children. Those who experienced less anxiety were associated with more time, ability to sleep any time, having good advisors, encouragement from wives and less pressure from work.

DISCUSSION

According to the data gathered from the responses of thirteen families, the majority of parents perceived themselves and their children as being well adjusted and with few stress problems. When problems and stress arose they were able to cope successfully. In each category of possible problems, there was only minimal stress, on the whole, expressd:

1. Financial. All thirteen students were government or institution sponsored, thus they have little or no financial problems. This is an important factor in determining the student's academic success (Kangwanshirathada, 1983).

2. Housing. Although findings show that the families are discontented with some aspect of housing, there are many factors that help these families in coping with this problem. Firstly, these students live very close to each other, they look after one another and the children play together. This reduce much of their anxieties. Supporting this general behavior are studies by Klein et al (1971), who used a psychiatric approach to social adaptation studies and found that more than half of the Asian students had not established significant social relationships with Americans during their stay. This phenomenon of social isolation is a well-documented facet of the foreign students' adjustment to life in the United States as was shown in a series of studies written on African students by Cohen (1971), by Hegazy (1968) in a report on Egyptian students and by Gandhi (1970) on Indian students. Secondly, the location of the student housing was within a five to ten minutes walking distance of the university. This became a great convenience to the students.

Regarding the limited and crowded living space, the Southeast Asian family structure is usually in the form of an extended household. They are used to many family members in one household. The children are used to sharing sleeping quarters with their siblings. The only difference is that there might be more open space in their home country. This sleeping arrangement supports a cross-cultural study by Whiting, Kluckhon and Anthony (1958) that in a

great majority of societies infants sleep in the same beds with their mothers while they are nursing. Also a child who has a chance of sleeping with one or both parents from birth and later, continues to co-sleep with siblings until the age of 15 (Caudill & Plath, 1966). Djamore (1959), an anthropologist who did a study of the sleeping arrangement of Malaysian families noted that Malaysian children up to the age of five or six years sleep with their parents on the same mat or mattress, or in close proximity to them on different mats. If they are older, they sleep further away in the same room, or in a different room from their parents if there was one available.

3. Language Difficulty. All thirteen graduate students reported little or no difficulties with the language. Of all the variables that might affect the scholastic aspect of a foreign students' sojourn, proficiency in English correlates most often with academic success (Allen, 1965; Halsz, 1969; Melendez-Craig, 1970). The children's language ability was also reported positively because of their ability to absorb languages quickly and the efficiency of the Pittsburgh public schools.

4. Cultural conflicts related to child-rearing practices, religion, diet, and schooling for their children. Most parents were not comfortable with what the children learned from American culture. They regarded the behavior shown on television and by some American children as not compatible with Asian culture. They did, however, like the benefits of their children's opportunity to learn English and to gain a good education. Apprehension over these cultural conflicts probably created some tension and anxiety in the children exposed to two cultures. When they first arrived, the parents encouraged the children to participate in activities with the American children, to watch T.V. etc. in order to learn the language. Later, when these contacts caused an erosion of their native culture, a resentment against the changes developed in the parents. Regarding the schooling for their children, all parents reported favorably on the American schools, and said they provided a good education and had competent teachers. They were worried, however, over their children's readjustment to their home country's school system upon their

return because of their long absence from their home culture, their loss of language fluency and the competitive nature of their home school systems.

The only major problem they had in religious matters was related to their diet and to the abstinence from certain kind of meat. Some of these problems were alleviated by their wives who were able to make satisfactory dietary substitutions.

5. Academic factors. Findings show that the majority of these students were successful because of the above mentioned factors and because they were carefully tested and screened before being chosen to come to the U.S. Studies show that good academic performance prior to their arrival in the U.S. predict good academic achievement in the United States (Halsz, 1969).

6. Health. The majority of students reported good health while staying in this country. The problems they had were probably related to the weather. Since these students are accustomed to the tropical weather, cold weather plays a major role in their health and their activities. Only a few students complained of health problem related to academic tension.

CONCLUSION

On the whole the study confirms many research findings that had been previously reported, but breaks new ground looking at the international students' perceptions of their children. Despite the general pattern of effective coping, there are certain problems that had been identified in this paper. The findings suggest how institutions or individuals might help with the kinds of problems faced by international students and their families by offering services such as orientation, counselling, networking, etc. Because the study was limited to interviewing parents, it does not address directly with the problems that children have. Future research should include interviews with teachers to determine their adjustment patterns at school, and most important of all, interviews with children to see their perspectives on the sojourn.

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